The kitchen mistake that's spreading disease: Why washing raw chicken is a deadly gamble

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- Washing raw chicken is a dangerous and outdated practice that increases the risk of food poisoning by spreading bacteria.
- Recent data shows the habit is becoming more common, with over half of home cooks polled now washing whole chickens.
- High-speed imaging studies confirm that washing chicken under a tap splashes bacteria-laden water droplets around the kitchen.
- Cooking chicken to an internal temperature of 165 F (74 C) is the only reliable method to kill harmful pathogens like Salmonella and Campylobacter.
- Safe handling, including using separate cutting boards and thorough hand washing, is critical to preventing cross-contamination.

In kitchens across the globe, a well-intentioned ritual is unfolding with troubling frequency: the washing of raw chicken. Driven by a belief they are cleaning their food, a growing number of home cooks are inadvertently engaging in a practice that health authorities and food safety experts have warned against for decades. New data from Australia reveals that this counterproductive habit is not only persistent but is actually on the rise, creating an expanding vector for dangerous bacterial contamination. The consequences are far from trivial, contributing to millions of annual foodborne illness cases. This resurgence of a debunked practice pits old-school culinary tradition against modern food science, with the safety of the home kitchen hanging in the balance.

The pervasive and growing myth

The core message from food safety organizations is unequivocal. “Despite what you've been told or seen on social media, you should never wash raw chicken before cooking as this will likely spread bacteria throughout your kitchen, increasing the risk of foodborne illness,” asserts Associate Professor Julian Cox, Deputy Chair of the Food Safety Information Council. The logic seems sound to many—rinsing removes visible impurities. However, modern poultry processing already includes a washing step, making further cleaning in a domestic sink redundant and hazardous.

Alarmingly, the practice is becoming more common. Council research shows that in 2025, 51 percent of Australian adults who cook whole raw chicken typically wash it first, a significant increase from 49 percent in 2021. The figures are similarly high for skin-on pieces (48 percent, up from 43 percent) and skinless pieces (44 percent, up from 40 percent). This trend is particularly concerning given chicken's status as the most popular animal protein in Australia, meaning a risky habit is being applied to a staple food.

The science of splash and spread

The primary danger of washing chicken lies in the invisible shower it creates. Harmful bacteria like Campylobacter and Salmonella, common inhabitants of raw poultry, are not simply rinsed down the drain. Instead, they are spread via water droplets that can travel far beyond the sink basin.

Recent research using high-speed imaging has visually captured this threat. Studies demonstrate that water flowing onto the soft surface of chicken meat creates divots and significant splashing. These ejected droplets, teeming with bacteria, land on nearby countertops, utensils, and clean food. The research found that bacterial transmission increases with a higher tap height, a faster water flow rate, and the use of aerated water—common conditions in a typical home kitchen. This creates a pathway for cross-contamination, where pathogens are transferred to foods like salads or desserts that will not be cooked, thereby bypassing the safety step that heat provides.

A historical habit meets modern reality

The stubborn persistence of chicken washing is rooted in historical practice and a deep-seated desire for control in the kitchen. For generations, recipes in cookbooks from the 1960s and beyond instructed cooks to rinse poultry. It was a step passed down through families, born from a time of different processing standards and a logical, if misguided, attempt to ensure cleanliness. The U.S. Department of Agriculture began officially recommending against the practice in the 1990s, but old habits, especially those tied to family tradition and food preparation, die hard.

Analysis of consumer behavior suggests people continue the practice for several reasons: a distrust of modern industrial food processing, a belief that they are washing off feces or other matter, or the simple inertia of “it’s the way I’ve always done it.” Some even believe that washing chicken with acidic agents like vinegar or lemon juice will kill bacteria. Science has debunked this, showing that such brief washes are ineffective at killing pathogens and only serve to increase the risk of splashing.

The path to safer poultry preparation

Abandoning the rinse is only one part of a comprehensive food safety strategy. The most critical step is ensuring chicken is cooked to a temperature that destroys harmful bacteria. Food safety authorities universally recommend cooking poultry to an internal temperature of 165 F (74 C), which should be checked with a meat thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the meat. Visual cues like clear running juices are not reliable indicators of safety.

Beyond cooking, proper handling is essential to prevent illness. Key practices include:

- Always washing hands with soap and water before and after handling raw poultry.
- Using separate cutting boards and plates for raw meat and ready-to-eat foods.
- Defrosting frozen chicken in the refrigerator or microwave, never on the counter.
- Thoroughly cleaning all surfaces, utensils, and sinks that have contacted raw poultry with hot, soapy water.

For those who feel compelled to remove excess moisture from chicken, the safe alternative is to pat the meat dry with paper towels, which should be disposed of immediately afterward.

A clear conclusion for a cleaner kitchen

The evidence leaves no room for doubt: the sink is not a safe place for raw chicken. The act of washing, once a symbol of conscientious cooking, has been redefined by science as a significant contributor to kitchen contamination. With foodborne disease causing an estimated 4.67 million illnesses in Australia alone each year, the collective decision to break this single habit could have a profound impact on public health. The journey to safer meals requires trusting in the power of heat, not the illusion of water. By leaving the chicken unwashed and focusing on proper cooking and hygiene, home cooks can confidently protect their kitchens and their families from preventable harm.

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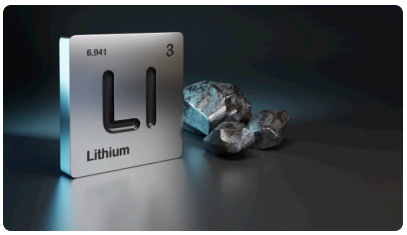

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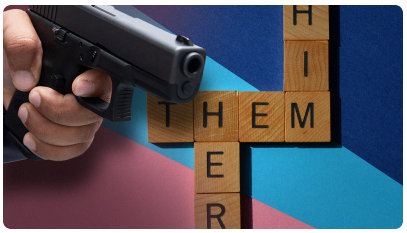

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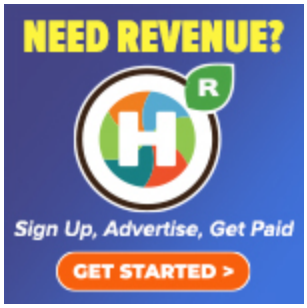

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Billy Bob
6 hours ago

Warshing happy (dirty) feet before making amber broth full of gelatin in the slow cooker (just for longevity and things) appears legit. Bland muscle meat is not a necessity, mini dinosaur of latter days (chicken) with large feet, body and long neck looks purdy cute though.

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